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Significance of Veil through the Lens of Imtiaz Dharker's "Purdah"

VISHAKHA DESHWAL¹ AND DR. ASHOK SINGH RAO²

ABSTRACT

The present study aims to bring out the role of a veil along with the pain and suffering a woman has to undergo, to ensure equality of rights as compared to her counterpart. She is constrained within the four walls, be it the four walls of her veil (Burkha) or be it the walls of restriction. The objective of the study is to bring forth the oppression faced by women, through the work of Imtiaz Dharker's 'Purdah I'. Therefore, it is an attempt to understand the hyped importance and value of a veil in a woman's life and the role it plays in the society. Hence through systematic study, it aims to raise the question of importance of a veil in a society where this "Gender is negligible" and yet plays a significant role in understanding whether a veil is a form of oppression and suffering or a form of freedom, power, and security in a woman's life.

Keywords: Veil, Matriarchy, Justice, Restriction, Equality.

I. PURDAH: AN INTRODUCTION

"Shall any gazer see with mortal eyes, or any searcher know by mortal mind? Veil after veil will lift but here must be veil upon veil behind."

Edwin Arnold

The present study aims to achieve its objective i.e., finding out whether a veil is actually an implication on women or is it something which women actually prefers because it protects them from the evil eyes. Through detailed study of the poem "**Purdah I**" by **Imtiaz Dharker** and other concepts related to veil, Muslim culture and Indian traditions, the paper shall reach a soluble conclusion. Women across all cultures share similar history of being burdened by patriarchy, domesticity, motherhood and abuse; that all third world women are doubly disadvantaged as they belong to the contexts of penury, un-enlightenment, and a general shortage of resource and possibilities. The objective is to make a clear distinction whether a purdah is a veil of justice or injustice. Does it hold significance or is it a forced tradition?

¹ Author is a Research Scholar at Mody University, India.

² Author is a Professor and Head of English Department at Mody University, India.

Whether it is something even more sacred than tradition and religion.

The earliest poems of Imtiaz Dharker is **“Purdah I”**. She was interested in the physical covering of a veil or a curtain; What’s hidden and what’s revealed; what it feels like to look out from the inside, from behind the cloth i.e., veil.

The poem **“Purdah I”** attempts and highlights the poor condition of women. During those times, women were forced to wear purdah, as purdah was considered to protect them from evil gaze. Dharker tries to raise voice against the purdah system and speak for women’s freedom. One insight to the poem can be that Dharker’s aim was to eliminate the purdah practice as she wanted equal status for women in the society. Women don’t have any hands in the economic, social and political affairs of a country as men have. Through the poem, the poetess was questioning and reawakening the society towards a very critical issue i.e., Women’s freedom. The pity position of women is depicted in **“Purdah I”** Who are behind the purdah and whose inner voice wants to scream out loud and shred the purdah, altogether abolish the purdah system. Therefore, Imtiaz Dharker’s poem **“Purdah I”** transcends to voice the problems of a community, where she has explored a facet of the Muslim women’s identity. The paper deals with **Muslim purdah** and not **Hindu ghunghat**. A purdah is a form of a curtain for female body (Metaphorically). Therefore, the paper is entirely focussed on purdah.

II. PURDAH: GENESIS

Purdah system was brought into practice by Muslims but with time was also adopted by Hindus. The purdah system in India meant the seclusion of women. In many Islamic countries, the seclusion and veiling of women is practiced to a substantial or a marginal degree. The practice of purdah is derived due to a concern which is to control female sexuality and to shield women from being the objects of the sexual desire of men other than their husbands. That is why spatial boundaries play a very crucial role in the Muslim society. The Muslim society is divided into two sub universes: the universe of men and the universe of women.

III. PURDAH- AN INTERPRETATION

“Purdah I” within the first verse from the poem, a girl is told that she is “old enough to learn some shame” as if only girls must learn all the shame.

There’s tension within the poem between different configurations of the veil: the poem begins with the assertion that purdah could be a quite safety. The body finds a place to conceal. Possibly, Dharker is trying to put forward the idea of double consciousness behind the veil: She probably tries to manifest a number of situations but at the same time portrays the

suffocation caused due to the veil. Dharker says that the veil “fans out against the skin / much like the earth that falls / on coffins after they put dead men in.” Indeed, a strong point of view in regard to the Purdah practice by women, but it’s also one that has to be understood and explained. Within the fourth stanza, the poet denounces how women have been induced to feel “between the thighs a sense of sin” for a thing that they don’t even possess, also creating a connection between veiled and unveiled women, both sharing half-remembered things / from someone else’s life/perhaps from yours, or mine. The poem also suggests that this guilt and this perception of enclosure has been passed on from generation to generation. Thus, it is perceptible that women feel oppressed in the society due to a veil which is why, clearly, the veil is a metaphorical element in the poem, hence, referring to a psychological situation of women. It is the veiling of the mind Dharker refers to more than the veiling of the body. The actual imputation is in opposition of “curtain/drape” that is very effectively prompted within the meaning of the word Purdah in Persian language which fractionate and separates women from the rest of the world.

As Dharker puts it:

“I use the image of purdah in this sequence of poems to look at what’s shown and what’s hidden. It is obviously much more than just the idea of the physical purdah, it was what you choose to hide, what you are harassed to hide”.

There is importance on an individual’s need for self-space and inner soul in the poem. “a light filter inward”, while “voices speak inside us / echoing in the spaces we have just left”. There also are images of alienation within the poem, as if the veiled body were distinct from one’s own interior life and real self. “she stands outside herself / sometimes in all four corners of a room”. The woman projects herself outside of the space she inhabits, between her skin and also the veil, but this unexpected attention on the outside world is shattered in the end. “While the doors keep opening inward and again inward”.

“**Purdah I**” gives notable insight in context to a person’s individuality and how it is important for a woman to have an identity. Dharker begins by “One day they said^[SEP]she was old enough to learn some shame.” Whereas Dharker considered “shame” would come quite naturally. Purdah is considered to be a safety for the body, a place to hide. “The cloth fans out against the skin^[SEP]much like the earth that falls^[SEP]on coffins after they put the dead men in.” Refers to, when a girl is seen as an object by the society, it is then that the girl opts to wearing a veil due to which her vision of the world is restricted. The veil also refers to the safety of a woman, how veil protects her from abuse and trauma, how she isolates herself from the rest of the world and

then she is forced to do what is expected of her rather than what she feels. A girl, since childhood is taught how to function otherwise, she will bring home shame, that's why "SHE" loses a sense of being true to herself. Dharker's poem relate to these early teachings.

In the beginning, the girl considers purdah as something distinct or separate from her, but slowly with time she learns to accustom herself with the purdah, it changes her perception about herself and about the world. 'She stands outside herself'. She soon understands that her life is not her own, her life is owned by patriarchy and the government because she functions as per their norms, which disables her to practice even her basic rights.

A central thought in the poem is the issue of gaze that's why it has been considered from both the viewpoints in the poem. The viewpoint of the girl and the one who objectifies and situate her. Hence, a girl is forced to believe that she has faults in herself, that's why she keeps on introspecting and tries to better herself and understand the world around herself.

IV. PURDAH: AN ISLAMIC NOTION

"It is like a second skin to me. It is supple as a living membrane and moves and flows with me. There is beauty and dignity in its fall and sweep. It is my crown and my mantle, my vestments of grace. Its pleasures are known to me, if not to you."

Muslim men refuse to give Muslim women the freedom to practice their sovereignty. Little girls are being asked to don hijabs and turn into sexual beings long before puberty.

A veil doesn't grab much attention in a Muslim state as majority of women wear it but where veiling is not practiced, in that country it does come into the limelight. Eventually, an unveiled female Muslim body becomes a sign of victory for the Muslim male. Against this background, the veil finds itself concerned within discourses of 'difference' and 'otherness'.

V. PURDAH: VEIL & FEMINISM

"Feminism isn't about making women strong. Women are already strong. It's about changing the way the world perceives that strength."

G.D. Anderson

It was in 1890s that the term "feminism" came into English usage. There are certain terms which cannot be defined and do not have a word boundary, feminism is one such term which according to the present scenario cannot be defined. *In fact, it is a term, which has infinite definitions, as the term is prevalent to each era/century. A Women's movement that has been misinterpreted by the patriarchy. "Feminism is the struggle to end sexist Oppression-Bell hooks."*

Having been identified as primary citizen of the domestic universe, women are deprived of power even within the world in which they are confined, since it is the man who wields authority within the family. The duty of Muslim women is to obey. It is considered that men and women can get together i.e., unite only for procreation as it is required for the survival of society. In order to prevent sexual interaction between members, seclusion and veiling were developed. But paradoxically, when such seclusion takes place it only intensifies the sexual aspect of interaction between male and female.

The reason why women are forced to wear purdah could be the gaze a man gives to a woman. A man is more capable to cause harm to a woman's honour with his eyes and with his thinking as if he were to grab her with his hands. Men need to change their way of looking at women. It should be with respect rather than with a stare of assault and mal intension.

The theory that seclusion in Islam is an implementation, a tactic to protect the passive male who cannot control himself sexually in the presence of the lust-inducing female is further justified in "verse 60 of Sura 24, which explains that elderly women (supposed to be unattractive) can go unveiled."

The seclusion of women is considered as the oppression of women, at the same time it is seen as the source of pride by the Muslim men. Harems³ were considered even more prestigious, which are the ultimate form of seclusion. Women consider seclusion better than going out because when they go out, they are confined to even more restrictions, so they feel more comfortable in the seclusion of harems.

What is attacked and debated over the years are the women and not the sexuality. Women are considered as the object and the culprit rather than sexuality, though it is the sexuality that has been the dangerous instrument of destruction.

VI. PURDAH: JUSTIFYING THE VEIL

(A) Shouldn't women have the right to choose whether to wear the veil or not?

The practice of veil be it women wearing a veil or veiling the sacred places, this practice is being followed in many cultures and religions for ages. In present scenario, veiling is considered overall as polarising issue. But as a matter of fact, the practice of veiling was practiced even before Islam and continues beyond Middle East.

³ Harems- Domestic spaces that are reserved for the women of the house in a Muslim family. This private space has been traditionally understood as serving the purpose of maintaining seclusion of women from other men.

The Islamic veil - Burka⁴ or Hijab⁵ has become a public symbol of a woman's identity. Muslim Women were forced to wear veil because they were endowed with a fatal attraction, which erodes the male's will to resist her. It is appropriate to quote an excerpt that is self-explanatory as to why Muslim women always had the burden to wear the veil:

"The Prophet saw an unknown woman. He hurried to his house and had intercourse with his wife Zaynab, then left the house and said, "When the woman comes towards you, it is Satan who is approaching you. When one sees a woman and he feels attracted to her, he should hurry to his wife. With her, it would be the same as with the other one."

"Commenting on this quotation, Imam an established voice of Muslim tradition, reports that the Prophet was referring to the Fascination, to the irresistible attraction to women that God instilled in man's soul, and he was referring to the pleasure man experiences when he looks at the woman, and the pleasure he experiences with anything related to her. She resembles Satan in his irresistible power over the individual. This attraction is a natural link between the sexes. Whenever a man is faced with a woman, fitna⁶ might occur: 'When a man and a woman are isolated in the presence of each other, Satan is bound to be their third companion.'"

Therefore, the above excerpt answers the question that why wearing a veil was mandatory? It was worn in order to protect herself, her own honour.

Some Muslim women believe that hijab has liberated them from the society's expectation of women, while others are still confined within it. The veil is a sign of man's authority, Islam clarifies that it is simply a sign of faith, modesty and chastity that serves to protect the devout from molestation. Like the four walls of the house protects the house from evil gaze and protects what's private, the same way the veil protects the women from evil gaze and keeps their body private from the society.

(B) Does Islam give Muslim women freedom of religion and an option to wear hijab or not?

"Quran Surah Al-Baqarah verse 256 says, there is no compulsion in the religion. Each person can, should and must be free to choose whether or not to be religious, what religion to follow, and how observant to be in that religion. Any Muslim who says otherwise is violating this basic tenet of Islam."

To some, a veil is a form of oppression forced upon them by patriarchy while to others, it

⁴ Burka- It covers the entire face and body, leaving a mesh screen above the eyes

⁵ Hijab- The most commonly worn Muslim veil that covers the head and neck but eaves the face clear

⁶ Fitna- Sexual temptation

represents simplicity, individuality, and a sense of security.

VII. PURDAH: ANALYSIS

“And she continues in this vein; ‘the masculine’ and ‘the feminine’ are not biologically fixed but culturally presupposed.”

- Judith Butler (Gender Trouble)

To explain these lines, it is sufficient to say that male and female are biologically created by God, but masculine and feminine aspect are all human made. It is we who have created the gap of the stronger and the weaker and we are the only ones who can bridge this gap because we are the creators of this gap.

After much of interpretations and understanding, it is precise to say that women wear veil to protect themselves from the unsafe, threatening, and vulnerable gaze of the men. An old lady is not attractive so she is exempted from wearing veil at the same time a young girl is forced to wear a veil because she is young, attractive, and vibrant because she possesses all these qualities hence, she will be vulnerable to men which will cause her danger and harm. In order to be safe from the gaze of men and not be an attraction to men she is forced to hide her body and face behind the veil. It is men who don't have control over their urges-emotions that lead to unsafe behaviour towards women. Women are often considered as the object of destruction of social behaviour and decorum of the society, but it is the sexuality that is the object of destruction.

In addition to gender oppression, wearing the veil is associated with self-segregation and the existence of parallel communities. In this regard, the veil hinders face-to-face communication and exacerbates the social isolation of veiled Muslim women because of the difficulty in communicating with a person whose face is covered.

VIII. PURDAH: CONCLUSION

The veil is considered as a sign of Muslim identity, yet it has divergent interpretations by the spectator than the person donning the veil. There's always the pressure of being judged, no matter what one does, so, it is all about how one deals with it. It's a matter of perception towards that piece of cloth. All religions cast women as sinners and temptresses, while, on the other hand, they are also portrayed as goddesses in some religion. A veil is much more than what one understands because it is a term full of contradictions as it is now a postmodern term. Therefore, to conclude one interpretation can be that a veil is our reflection of our own thoughts and beliefs. One really can't draw parallels whether the veil is justice or injustice because it

will differ from an individual to society to culture to religion. Ultimately, the right person to make a statement whether a veil is a form of oppression or freedom is the woman wearing it. Only she can personally voice whether donning the veil is justice or injustice.

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